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Vultures of Tibet:
Lessons in Clandestine Filmmaking

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Report

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Abstract

Vultures of Tibet:
Lessons in Clandestine Filmmaking

by

Russell Oliver Bush, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

SUPERVISOR: Paul J Raval

Over the course of nearly three years I created a documentary film titled, Vultures of Tibet. My film investigates sky burial, a private ritual where the bodies of Tibetan dead are offered to wild griffon vultures. The tradition is becoming a paid tourist attraction as Chinese modernization in Tibet continues. I have tried with this film to illuminating an ideological conflict often hidden to the outside world through the intimate yet inherently voyeuristic lens of the camera. This report chronicles my experience as a filmmaker bringing this project into reality.

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THE IDEA

The first time I saw wild animals eat a person, I was in my cubicle at the National Geographic Society in Washington, DC sorting DVD's in the natural history unit. Some of them were about the migration of flamingos; others cutely anthropomorphized mother polar bears and fuzzy penguins. My hubris unchecked, I was poised for a promotion from intern to series producer on the Society's highest budget natural history project to date; and any moment I could steal was spent gleaning for new ideas to re-invigorate wildlife filmmaking. Having recently made a passionate, yet equivocal push for a South American Bush Dog shoot (which has never been filmed in the wild), or a rare transparent boxing frog in Costa Rica, I decided the images that had arrested my focus might be better kept close to home.

Captivated and at the same time frightened by the image of this deceased man, I was like a child learning for the first time of my own mortality. Confronting my understanding further was another person in this photo, feeding the brain and other recent human remains to no less than 80 wild vultures. The photo flickering off my LCD screen continued into an anonymously posted series that documented a dead Asian looking man being tied to a post by the neck, cut open along his back and legs, and systematically fed to the waiting vultures. As I continued through the photos nowhere could there be found a caption to responsibly explain this event, or a credit for the photographer. There was an incredible lack of context provided in the presentation of these images, and I needed to know more.

I didn't know it at the time, but Elisabeth Oakham, the producer of the documentary film I was about to make, was sitting in the cubicle next to me. I shared the photos with Lis, and she was equally awestruck. For a moment we conjectured the cultural meanings of the event in the photos, and quickly turned to research.

The event we had seen in the photos was a Tibetan burial ritual called jhator, or sky burial, where the bodies of the Tibetan dead are fed to wild griffon vultures (gyps himalayensis). In Tibet, the tradition has been practiced for over a thousand years, and shares some similarities with early Zoroastrian communities. Several studies on the burial suggest it took root in Tibet due to the lack of suitable topsoil for burial underground, and the scarcity of fuel sources to provide for cremations. Speaking with a number of Tibetan monks in The United States, Canada, India, and Tibet they have all described sky burial to me as grounded in the Tibetan Buddhist culture of benefiting other sentient beings by offering them one's body.

Working in the natural history unit of National Geographic Television, both Lis and I were captured by the topic, and had actively been seeking content that complicated our collective understanding of the natural world. We had previously had a number of conversations centering on the idea that while incredibly beautiful, many nature-oriented films missed the mark in telling the whole story of the worlds they depict. This is a sentiment that over the next two and a half years would keep me committed to a standard of honesty, many times confronting my endurance and ethics as a filmmaker.

Perhaps because both Lis and I had never made a proper documentary before, and likely because we were ready to work outside the boundaries of an

institution, we made the early commitment to create a short documentary film investigating the relationship between nature and culture on the Tibetan Plateau. It is also likely due to the fact that this was our first documentary, that the film has now been successfully completed. Other seasoned filmmakers or corporations I presume would have flagged a production like ours too risky for a number of reasons from the outset. Let alone the budget and time necessary to do justice to a topic like this, as a short film, we looked beyond a long list of potential pit falls: the issues of finding vulture nests in an area where there are simply no ornithologists conducting field research, the Tibetan and Mandarin language barriers, the fact that neither of us had ever even been to Asia, the emotional sensitivities of filming an event like sky burial for the subjects we would meet, and most of all simply shooting a film in Tibet while protecting our subjects. Since 2009, 90 people have lit themselves on fire in protest of the Chinese Government's colonization of Tibet and limitations on religious expression, education, use of the Tibetan language, and general development of the region. Most of these immolations, resulting often in death, occurred less than a day's drive from the town in which we would shoot our film, and it's quite likely that the number of immolations I have stated here will have grown significantly by the time this report on my film is made official.

Thankfully**,** when we committed to making this film a reality, Lis and I knew relatively little about the challenges and personal sacrifice that would confront us as people and test the will of our production over the next two and a half plus years. Our project is now complete, but it has taken the absolute commitment of people

from countries all around the world to bring this brief twenty-minute film into existence with the opportunity to find an audience.

As many undertakings in the world of independent film go, a combination of tireless work, community support, obsession, and luck came together to yield something that looks and feels like an emotive piece of cinema. It's certainly enough to allow the filmmaker to question their intentions, motivations, and perspective at least a couple of times throughout the process. Though it may seem so to some audience members or be promoted by a number of film festivals in the future, my work on this project has not been journalism, nor do I want to wear that hat. The work I have produced is not objective, nor do I claim that my presence in the world I documented didn't have some measurable affect on it. Documentary is often thought of as the medium of truth. There are even stylistic modes within it even formally recognized as 'cinema verité' or cinema truth. I think it's important to recognize the inherent fallacies in an idea of objective reality and universal truth however when it comes to film. The intention of my work and methodologies in the field and the editing suite throughout this project have never been to claim a stance of objectivity, but rather reach for a more encompassing engagement of relative perspectives and emotional realities. Working in this way has allowed me to bring not answers to the screen, but hopefully questions about the worlds at which I point the camera. I find this kind of relationship between the subject, filmmaker, and audience notably more challenging than watching network news, but perhaps it provides an avenue for communities to confront the events on the silver screen and reach new

understandings of the evolving and nuanced world we live in; the kind of world far too complicated for philosophical and political absolutes.

For these reasons I believe documentary film has the power to bring about great personal change from subject to viewer, and so therefor it has been my medium through this project as a process, and most certainly for me as a filmmaker, not the means to an end of a twenty-minute short film.

DEVELOPMENT

In March of 2010 I began formally researching what it would take to make a film about sky burial and how I might approach the topic. This initially involved doing a considerable amount of research, as I had never been to any of the regions that practice the tradition including Tibet, China, Nepal, and parts of Bhutan. If I were to be able to create an approach as a filmmaker, I would need to know the historical, cultural, ecological, religious, geographic, and political contexts of the world in which I would be trying to work. I understood this field of knowledge would likely need to come from many sources, and in all probability never be complete, but I began this process consulting what had been formally written in scholarly journals and international print news. During this time, I had unlimited access to the National Geographic Society's research library. This provided a fairly helpful resource in at least understanding the void of context into which this project was looking. That is to say that while I could find a breadth of information on the religious beliefs of Tibetan Buddhism, nearly every other topic I was interested in was wrought with conflict, propaganda, or simply hadn't been written about. I have come to learn that for doing work in Tibet, these factors are the good friend of anyone there.

If we were to make a film about the Himalayan Griffon Vulture, we would want to know a great deal of information about it's geographic distribution, it's home range areas, it's nesting and feeding habits, when eggs are laid, and when chicks hatch. For the most part, this information was not available, and so for the

time being we resorted to researching it's conspecific species, the Eurasian Griffon Vulture. We could find the answers to our questions for birds in the mountains of Ethiopia, but there was no way to verify any of this information for the birds in Tibet, let alone plan a shoot around it. Additionally, we knew that we weren't only making a film about birds and that a thorough understanding of the political and cultural landscape of Tibet would be necessary if we were to be successful.

Most people know a little bit about Tibet. They know that the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1950s was very difficult and continues to be for the majority of Tibetans. They likely know that the spiritual and political leader of Tibet, the 14th Dalai Lama, was forced to leave the country over the Himalayas into exile in India. As well, many people in the west also think of Tibet as a beautiful Shangri-La of spiritual enlightenment, and I think that's a dangerous understanding. I say this in the hopes of considering the point of entry that many Western viewers will have watching my film. The level of propaganda that has permeated the narrative of Tibet runs very deep, and it's my hope that for the small number of people in the world that will see my film, we can reset the watch to some level on that identity.

I had not known that more than 1.2 million people had died in the famine and genocide that followed Mao's Great Leap forward. I didn't realize that the Tibet noted today on international maps is only about a third the size of the Tibet recognized by Tibetans. In order to fraction the society, Tibet has been broken up into a number of Chinese provinces including Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and parts of Yunnan, as well as the inaptly named Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). Travel between these provinces, which have broken up the traditional Tibet regions

of Utsang, Amdo, and Kham, specifically for Tibetans, is often difficult and policies are frequently changing. I didn't yet know about the secret prisons where Tibetans perceived to be dissectors have been killed and tortured, a practice that continues today, nor did I know about the secret police force constantly gathering information in Tibetan communities. I didn't even know about the contingency of Chinese spies in North America who are keeping tabs on Tibetan refugee communities and which I would need to acknowledge in protecting my sources years later. Had I of known fully of these elements, this film likely would not exist.

In my preparation for this production, I did however confront the fact that for works of film and television production, the Chinese Government requires filmmakers to register with their internal office of propaganda (it's official title), and should they be approved, which few are, that they are assigned an official censorship monitor to escort the production. This nearly ended our aspirations for producing a film on the subject, as the chances of a censorship official escorting our team into a sky burial were simply unfathomable, if not entirely unethical on a colonial level. Even closer to the implications of making a film, I had no idea how these issues and histories would play out when talking with Tibetan subjects on camera, or even if that was possible. Considering these challenging limitations, our production team began considering the possibility of making the film outside of Tibet.

As our outreach for an ornithologist doing proper field research on gyps himalayensis continued, which would greatly increase our chances of filming the birds in the wild, we found what we thought was a streak of luck. We came across a

gentleman based in Pokhara, Nepal who I will refer to here, for reasons of anonymity, as Achal. For all of our efforts, he was the only person in Asia currently doing research on the birds and it seemed like we'd made our first real breakthrough in the production. Achal was conducting field research in an area of Nepal known as the Upper Mustang Region, where the peaks of the Himalayas reach over 20,000 feet in elevation. Griffon vultures frequently make their nests in the rocks along sheer cliffs, and finding active nests that are possible to film is a task that can literally take years of exploration to complete. It was because of this that we knew we'd need to work with someone like Achal or our entire effort in Asia would be spent looking for the fleeting hope of finding the birds. Even if Achal did know the GPS coordinates for active nests they may have been impractical for our purposes of filming. Rather quickly Lis and I shared our intentions for the film, and started receiving photos from Nepal of known vulture nests. It also happened to be that in the Upper Mustang, there were communities practicing sky burial. It seemed as if the elements were falling into place.

In our early conversations with Achal, he mentioned that we would not be the first film production he had worked with. He tipped us off that within the last year or two he had worked with a BBC production team that was shooting a segment on sky burial for the television series, The Human Planet (2010). We deduced that his experience with a production team could only be to our benefit, however it was important for us to acknowledge that we would not be the first filmmakers to undertake this subject. Through a resource at the National Geographic Society, I was able to screen the BBC's segment before it was released,

and was optimistic that the way I intended to communicate sky burial on a personal character level, as opposed to the common informational television documentary method, was still a strong possibility. I was however a little alarmed and took note that this television segment seemed to play on a western audience's fascination for a taboo and exotic practice. It seemed to package the sky burial as an ancient tradition tucked away in a corner of the world heightened on all fronts by a spiritual enlightenment unique to Tibetans, not seeing them as real people living in 2010. The television crew floated their camera above small huts on massive cranes, and the characters were contextualized by the voice of an English-speaking narrator. It seemed like a functional way to communicate with an audience, but certainly provided a disconnect for understanding the real people involved. I was glad I'd seen it and thankful to Achal for sharing.

Seeming like the pieces were set to move forward with Nepal and the Upper Mustang as our location, we began speaking more seriously with Achal about contracting him as one of our guides. I also began an outreach effort in the natural history film world to find a production fixer based out of Kathmandu or Pokhara who could arrange the basic necessities such as food, lodging, and travel in country for our shoot. Several names came up from my contacts at National Geographic and our team reached out to them. Everything appeared to be in motion when Achal notified us about the permitting policies for access to the Upper Mustang, a protected area by the Nepalese Government. It looked like at the very least it would cost about $15,000 USD, well beyond our budget, just to have access to get into the area with no prospects for negotiations. This hurdle effectively ended our hopes of

shooting the film in Nepal, and made clear to us why there are so few independent filmmakers creating natural history films on a budget. Our challenges looking into Nepal helped us realize our position in the industry as filmmakers, and that if this project was going to happen, we'd have to work outside the system to do it.

Lis and I thought long and hard about which path we'd try to take in discovering our film, or even if we had to determination to continue with it. We were in a situation whereby we'd either have to hedge our bets on filming in an area with slim odds for finding our human and animal subjects, break some variety of rules, or all of the above. I can say with confidence that the film we made could not have been done by a larger entity with a reputation and public image. As it broke down we could do one of the following: film in Nepal outside the Upper Mustang and likely not get what we were looking for, enter the Upper Mustang without a permit or guide (as Achal would not do so clandestinely), or make the film in Tibet via entry though China and under the weather without a permit from the censorship office. None of the above seemed like a sensible way to make a film with any mitigation of risk, but it also appeared a situation that would produce a greatly meaningful work should we be successful. The further we looked, shooting in Nepal just seemed out of our budget considerations at the moment, and there was not enough of a chance we'd get what we needed working outside the Upper Mustang. We thanked Achal for his help and information but had to scratch Nepal off the list of possibilities.

After what seemed like our first disappointment Lis and I discussed the nature of what we were trying to do with this film. We acknowledged that there would likely be more surprises throughout this process, and as we were learning

about the culture our curiosities were grounded in, the unexpected would likely play a fundamental role in our final film. Considering this reality, we decided if we were going to make a film about Tibetan culture as it exists today, we should try and be as authentic as possible and make it in Tibet, or not make it at all. We resolved that this approach would result in new understandings about the world and ideas we were curious about. Simply put, we needed to make the film under conditions that had prevented it from yet existing. I believe as a filmmaker that a challenging production is a sign that you're doing something right; braving the frontier of misunderstanding and superstition with the hopes of providing context. If we couldn't make this film in Tibet now, we'd have to wait until we could.

PRE-PRODUCTION

I ended up not getting the promotion to official employee at National Geographic Television and I moved back to Austin, Texas to resume my progression in the MFA program at The University of Texas, which I had started two years earlier. Lis soon also left Washington and the Society, and returned to Toronto, Ontario in her native Canada. We had committed to making this ambitious film, but from here forward we would have to do all of our work via correspondence.

We wanted to make a groundbreaking work that was somewhere between natural history film and social documentary. Our project was intended to follow a narrative of "the transmission of life" from the end of someone's experience as a human, through their sky burial, and into the peaks of the Himalayas with the same community of griffon vultures that had consumed them. This was my goal as a director, however I didn't know yet how I would achieve this or where I would get the money to do so.

My producer and I began looking further into the geography of Tibet to try and see if there was a place such a narrative could be captured. As we returned again to research, most of what we could find had come from travelers' blogs. Most often these were accounts of Americans or Western Europeans who had backpacked though Eastern Tibet, camera in hand with varying degrees of consideration for the culture within which they were traveling. Upon this search we found a number of photos, which showed the same bloody skulls we'd seen on the Internet a number of months before, and testimonies that described the burial itself. There were however

very few reports of what it was like to actually negotiate the access necessary to earn these images. Amongst these travelogues, most of the images seemed to have come from a township called Litang, in the far Western part of the Sichuan Province near the boarder to the TAR. If other Westerners had been able to access these areas and produce these images, I deemed it possible that we too could travel there and perhaps create the kind of film I envisioned.

In light of the prospect to film in the disputed area of Tibet/China, we acknowledged that it would be very difficult to obtain a permit for the kind of film we hopped to make, but needed to try anyway. Our approach was to get in contact with other filmmakers who had been successful in making work within Tibet in the last five years; for which there were several. Our first contact was made with Nelson Walker and Tsering Perlo who had recently completed their film, Summer Pasture (2010), a documentary shot in the Kham region of Eastern Tibet, and under the protection of an official film permit. Additionally they had partnered with two local organizations; The Kham Film Project, whose goal is to spread media literacy to Tibetan youth in the region, and Rabsal, an international NGO that aims to preserve Tibetan culture through documentary film. In the winter of 2011, Summer Pasture happened to be screening at a small arts festival in Brooklyn NY, and both Lis and I traveled there to try and learn from the lessons of these filmmakers.

Talking in a noisy Brooklyn coffee shop, the Summer Pasture crew was excited and supportive that we were embarking on this undertaking, but offered a healthy skepticism that we had never been to Tibet. In retrospect they were acknowledging the fact that we hadn't yet fully engaged in the media politics

surrounding the region. Essentially, any act of filmmaking in this part of the world, whether political in content or not, becomes a political action in regards to the Chinese Government, and thereby implicates the subjects within. They advised us that an official organization like The Kham Film Project or Rabsal would be very unlikely to partner with us as we were making a film that wouldn't have a good probability to receive a permit. These filmmakers added the anecdote that it had taken a number of years to receive their permit. While certainly important in the preservation of Tibetan culture, their film documented the tradition of pasturing yak in the summer; it was simply less risky a topic to receive approval from the Chinese Government than a film about a burial practice many Han Chinese perceive to be barbarous and backwards. This said, I highly commend the work done on Summer Pasture, I wouldn't doubt that it came into the world with more in the way of personal sacrifice than the making of my own film.

The meeting in New York was not what we had expected. Aiming to gain the support of an NGO we were hoping to leverage a partnership as a way to negotiate cultural access and resources in Tibet. This meeting made it clear that we would either have to chance waiting years for a permit or otherwise take the risk of making our film without government approval, as is many times the case when trying to comment on political realities. Neither were situations we wanted to face, and as the challenges involved in doing this kind of work revealed themselves to us, so too did the allure conquering them. This meeting allowed our production to clearly see what we would be getting into should we choose to continue with the project. The Summer Pasture crew emphasized the severity of doing work in Tibet

without the protection of a film permit, and though it had been done before, the path of a clandestine production is a risky one for the filmmakers and subjects. If we were to move forward on this project we would have to be willing to accept those risks. On a tangible level, we concluded the chances for imprisonment or worse would be unlikely for us based on our status as foreign nationals from the US and Canada, but that anyone we worked with in country stood far greater to loose. I can't attest to the accuracy of that calculation, but it's best we had to go by, and it's a chance we took. It was a difficult position to rationalize and forced us to be very clear about our intentions as we moved forward looking for collaborations, both from North America and Asia.

Committed to making our film in Tibet, we began searching for the small, but necessary crew we would need. We would have to travel from North America to China, arrive on the Tibetan Plateau over road, overcome the language and access barriers once in Tibet, find the vultures in their nests, convince Tibetans in a media sensitive culture to trust our intentions as filmmaker, and do all of the above in an artful way. Armed with the reality of our situation, reaching out to others involved an honest confrontation of the risks we faced. The first of these people we tried to find was a weathered cinematographer who understood that getting good material often means enduring very uncomfortable situations. I anticipated on this production that we'd likely do a healthy amount of difficult hiking to get into the areas where griffon vultures nest; and furthermore operate in a politically sensitive area where our intentions as filmmakers must remain secret. Our film was therefore incredibly lucky to sign on Drew Xanthopoulos as our cinematographer.

Drew was a fellow Film Production MFA candidate at the University of Texas and had proven his grit on his own film shot in the Montana winter the previous year. I had shot one of his previous works, but this was our first opportunity to work together with him as a cinematographer on a project of mine. I could not have made a better choice for this role, as Drew brought a level of commitment, professionalism, and craft that I have rarely, if ever seen on any other project. There were inevitable circumstances on our production where each of our crewmembers needed the support of our greater team, and Drew was an intrinsic part of that success. Our shoot in Tibet would either provide us with the fruits of diligent planning and execution or it would break us; and it likely would have if Drew had not been there.

We were now a crew of three, but we still needed to find people who could help us interact with communities in Tibet, find the vultures, and manage our travel and lodging. We would need to find these people within China remotely from the US and Canada, and if we couldn't, there was no point in working any further. The choices we made in searching for these people dictated the outcome of our work more directly than any others made in the years it took to create this film. As we saw it, we feared that even if we found someone with the right language skills in English, Mandarin, and Tibetan, and the willingness to commit to the risks of our production, that they would either be close enough to the Chinese Government that it would foil our status as undocumented filmmakers, or that they wouldn't fully understand what we sought. I didn't wan to end up in China suddenly without a crew. It was a notable challenge, not even to mention the monitoring of international

communications via email, skype, phone, and possible interceptions by the government that could occur should we find the perfect person.

The search for this person or two began with a rough start. Our initial approach was to try and find a Tibetan cultural interpreter who could sign onto the project understanding all the variables of our goals and limitations. This proved to be very difficult. We tried to track down tour guides from Eastern Tibet to work with on an independent contract level. Without being able to speak openly about our intentions for the film without implicating this person, it felt unethical to sign someone onto our project. The situation seemed to be at a stale mate. Unless we were to go to China and find this person on the ground, I wasn't sure how we could achieve what we needed. Equally, finding someone in North America who knew the regional sensitivities of the area we were headed was similarly daunting. I thought our only option might be casting ourselves into the abyss to put these details together once we arrived in country, clearly not a wise choice. I honestly thought we might have reached the end of our attempt to make a nonpolitical nature documentary in a communist country.

A stroke of luck that would not be the first to somehow grace our efforts came, and had we not received an email in January of 2011, we would not have made this film. The email was from a man I will refer to here as Boon-nam. This man not only knew the whereabouts of griffon vulture nests in the Amdo region of Eastern Tibet close enough to a commonly used sky burial site, but was also out of China when he messaged us. Lis had followed a lead on the Internet that came from searching for ornithologists in China, and while Boon-nam was not a scientist he

knew a great deal about the griffons. More so, he had led several expeditions into Tibet, one of which had been a film production, had a Chinese driver's license, and accepted the political reality of the kind of film we were trying to make. Not to say that communication was particularly easy, but Boon-nam was fundamentally pivotal to our production. As we had encountered some significant challenges in finding a Tibetan guide who could be our better eyes and ears while in country, Boon-nam was also very well connected in China and had a clear idea of where he might help us find such a person. I'm not sure entirely why he chose to help us to the level that he did, but I will forever owe this person my full gratitude towards the making of this film and recognize that my attempts to bridge a cultural gap were fortunately also shared by him.

Within a week or two Boon-nam contacted us again, this time from within China and at his own risk, and communicated that he thought he had found our Tibetan guide. He described the project to this person, who I'll refer to here as Tsering, and he agreed to talk more with us. At this point our project crossed over into a realm of uncertainties; we no longer knew who was listening to our **c**onversations and placed all of our trust in the two people we were having scratchy telephone conversations with in their second and third languages. We tried to keep our communications brief and focused and we developed rhetoric to talk about our film using generalizations that we hoped would confuse any Chinese officials listening in. This process tested our nerves, yet as the weeks went on we found no cause for alarm.

Considering our film would be a process of discovery once we entered Tibet and engaged with the emotional realities of Tibetan families in times of loss, there still existed a great unknown as to the feasibility of our concept despite talking with Tsering. Our conversations indicated it might be conceivable that we could film a sky burial and speak with the roghpas (those who cut the body of the dead at the burial), yet gaining access to someone who may be dying and comfortable with appearing in a film was a big question. Having recently sat at the bedside of my dying grandfather, I understood the sensitivity of what I was asking. I thought that earning the kind of access I was talking about would be unlikely, but as I hadn't been to Eastern Tibet, I didn't yet have a more accurate concept of how to construct a film on the topic. Lis and I figured we would hold fast with our original idea, and confront it in the real world once we arrived on the Tibetan Plateau. Our efforts in making this project seemed to be finding their footing, yet the very real consideration of how we would pay for this was still to be determined.

FUNDRAISING

When all work has been completed on this project, and it's had its fair run at exhibition and distribution, nearly $75,000 USD will have been spent on its creation. This number does not account for the in kind labor that was donated in services from many of our crew, or the physical resources contributed by an even larger number of people. Considering these donations and our cash budget, the financial effort that went into making Vultures of Tibet was closer to $150,000 USD. Taking on this kind of investment for a project with so many unknowns would have been more than my current financial footprint could have carried. This was a project rather that required an aggressive fundraising campaign which continued from development and pre-production all the way through distribution.

I consider myself lucky to have had my producer and cinematographer work on this project without asking for, and even denying to engage in any conversations about, personal invoices. Even so, doing this kind of work is very expensive and can be equally complicated to prepare a budget for. There have been many financial surprises in creating this project, most of them in reaction to making a film in two languages that I don't speak and the necessity to protect my sources and subjects. Our team had largely been successful in having the film pay for itself through our funding efforts, but the possibility of bankruptcy had been on our heals from the outset, and it may have even caught up to us once or twice.

When I made the commitment as a director to shoot the film in China/Tibet after finding our in country guides we did not yet have the money to realize this

plan, nor any materials from the field to convince potential investors or granting organizations of our aptitude. At this moment for the project all we had were our visions for a film and the commitment of our word. In order to generate some momentum towards our funding effort, both Lis and I contributed a small percentage of our total cash budget. This allowed us to travel to New York to meet the filmmakers of Summer Pasture, conduct early research, and defray some of the costs involved in our initial production. The majority of our cash budget however, was accounted for by the support of hundreds of people who expressed their belief in our efforts through monetary contributions at various stages. Following our initial start up contributions, Lis and I began a crowd-funding campaign in which we raised $10,000 USD in thirty days. This effort allowed for the initial production of our film in Tibet and carried with it the sincerity of our ambitions. That is to say from a funding perspective, it's difficult to be the first investor on a project with any size of a budget; once we were able to prove that a hundred or so people had already contributed to our film, finding others was less challenging.

As our production in Tibet was wrapping up I got a call on my satellite phone that Vultures of Tibet had been awarded a Texas Filmmaker's Production Fund Grant from the Austin Film Society in the amount of $5,000 USD. This contribution helped us begin the lengthy and expensive process of translating our raw materials into English. Following this the Austin Film Society invited me to a reception for the Texas Filmmakers Hall of Fame where I met Gary Newsom. Chances would have it that Gary had been in Tibet during the same time I was there shooting the film, and was a board member of the Austin Film Society. He was moved by what we had been

able to do and made a donation of $12,000 USD to our postproduction efforts. At the same time the Austin Film Society was hosting their own crowd-funding platform, from which another $500 USD trickled in. As we were running out of money in the process of translating our material we were awarded $1500 USD by the Nick Cominos Endowment for Documentary Film, and several months later we earned our second Texas Filmmakers Production Fund in the amount of $8,000 USD. With every battle won on the fundraising front, the process of raising money required less and less ground work. This would have taken a much longer arc had we not of gained the support from our peers and audience through our crowd-funding or developed a relationship with the Austin Film Society.

I believe as an independent filmmaker it's a good test to make films in a sustainable way, supported by a community. There are those who will say to just go out, grab a camera and start shooting your film, which I can understand to some degree. However, to realize a project that truly involves the collaboration of a team I frankly believe that if money or resources can't be raised, it's probably not a film the world needs. I may be on the other side of those words someday, but this process has shown me quite clearly that there is a tangible quota of money out there to be raised for efforts in independent cinema.

AN APPROACH

As the elements for our production began to fall into place a number of practical considerations, which would affect our creative decisions as filmmakers, began to present themselves. The most catalyzing of these conditions was the fact that since we would be operating without an official government licensed permit, we would need to blend in with the wave of tourist traffic that is common throughout Amdo and Eastern Tibet. We had targeted the entire month of May 2011 for our production effort, and since we would be shooting in the summer, the influx of tourists in Amdo would be near its peak. We obtained 60-day Chinese visas under tourist status and prepared ourselves to play the part of anxious bird watchers with a keen eye for the Black Neck Crane or the Greenish Warbler. Should we be searched and questioned, my wife prepared us with guidebooks on the bio diversity of Chinese flora and fauna. We memorized the names of all the common tourist sites that we would likely never see, and made arrangements to have a satellite phone on standby, should we need to make an emergency call back to the States from anywhere along our travels.

The consideration that we'd need to fit in as tourists played largely into the shooting format that we chose to use. Our goal was to appear outwardly that we were never filming at all, even if on a home video level, and therefore any thoughts of taking large format cinema cameras or even standard documentary equipment was out of the question. The only camera that made practical sense to use was a digital SLR with video capabilities. There are several makes and models of this

camera type, but essentially the technology allows for high resolution HD video to be recorded on a camera that looks from the outside as if it can only take still photos. In the summer of 2011 there was not another camera that could have worked better for our considerations than a digital SLR. We chose to go with the Canon 7D, which also considering the amount of travel we needed to do, made transporting our equipment much easier along international flights and constantly in and out of vehicles in Tibet. To this same extent, all equipment we used from tripods to sound gear needed to keep a very low profile and look like the sort of thing an amateur photographer might use. We ended up taking three Canon 7D camera bodies in case one happened to go down, lens options from 18mm – 1000mm, two tripods, and a number of small microphones that could attach easily to the top of our cameras.

We were confident that if we could get even a fraction of our equipment into China, that we'd be able to make the film we needed to. Our larger consideration was getting everything out, most of which the hard drives that would carry the media we'd collected over a month's time. In this regard, as we wouldn't be working near a reliable post service or internet connection, the best we could do was build as much redundancy to the backup of our media as possible, and hope that at least one iteration of our complete media storage made it through all security checkpoints and survived the physical journey. With our budget we chose to spare no expense on investing in reliable hard drives that were physically small with as much storage space as possible. I ended up putting my trust in a CalDigit 2TB RAID that was bus powered, meaning it could be operated without an external power source; perfect

for remote shooting, and could fit in my coat pocket. Altogether we brought enough drive space for three full redundancies of our media, without any limitations on the amount of footage we could collect. In the field we completely backed up our footage after each day's work.

Acknowledging the political realities of shooting a film in Tibet, our project could not have been done even five years prior. The advances in media storage and high resolution image capture had and continue to opened up modes of story telling and content itself that are constantly being pushed. Vultures of Tibet is living proof of this reality.

More important than using cameras with impressive features for our purposes, was knowing what to do with them. I strongly believe that documentaries deserve as much in the way of visual design as any other film might; and at least for the kinds of work I want to make, telling visual stories that communicate on an immersive level for an audience is a high priority. Drew, the cinematographer of my film and I talked to great length about the ways in which we wanted to visualize Tibet. My instinct on this project was to take a hands-off approach as the situations and content would allow. That is to say I was a certain advocate for very minimal camera movement and only when motivated by the subject, careful framing, and wide lenses. I wanted to create a film that allowed the subjects of our world to speak for themselves without the aid of heightened realities aided by high frame rates or ostentatious camera moves. As we prepared to embark on the shoot, my voice and Drew's balanced each other fairly well, and while we decided to take a stedicam with us, we were both grounded on the idea of communicating a world motivated by

the subject, yet observational in nature. For the time being it was all theory, but as we would find in Tibet some of our most important material came when we least expected it, and these early conversations I believe helped develop our second nature on how we would see the world.

FINAL PREPARATIONS

In the early spring of 2011, what we thought were the final details in planning the trajectory of our shoot were coming together. Following the recommendations of Boon-nam, we gave up on looking into the Litang area as a potential location and instead directed our attention to an area in the Amdo region of Eastern Tibet known as Zoige Country. Boon-nam thought we'd be successful basing our production out of the now quite active town of Taktsang Lhamo. The town straddles the present day Sichuan and Gansu Province boarder, and while relatively small, features two large monasteries, which would come to have incredible significance for our experiences there. In the Zoige Country area Taktsang Lhamo is the only site that conducts sky burials for at least a couple hundred kilometers, and is thereby a very active site for vultures. The town is positioned at the base of a severe set of mountainous cliffs, which are also densely populated by griffon vultures. Boon-nam told us he documented the exact location of a number of vulture nest, and while he didn't know if those nests were still active, he was confident that we'd be able to find our bids. We trusted him and decided on committing to Taktsang Lhamo.

It happened to be that Tsering also grew up in a town less than a half day's drive from Taktsang Lhamo and knew a great number of people in the region in general. His familiarity with the community, personal contacts, and understanding of the regional politics where a huge selling point, and we zeroed our calendars in on May 2011 to try and make this film.

Our preparations came once again to a halt on March 16th of 2011 when the first of a recent movement of protests came to pass in Eastern Tibet and throughout the international Tibetan community. On this day a young monk named Lobsang Phuntsok of the Kirti Monastery in Ngaba town, within a day's drive of Taktsang Lhamo, set himself on fire in response to governmental pressures on the monastery. Phuntsok had not been the first monk to ever self immolate in Tibet, but his case was the most recent in over two years and resultantly set off a chain reaction of other martyrs in Tibet who have taken the same action. The statistic on these immolations changes weekly, and by December of 2012, 90 Tibetans since Phuntsok had lit themselves on fire many of them dying from their injuries. We were trying to make our nature documentary on the eve of this wave of protest.

After seriously consulting with Boon-nam it seemed as if there was no choice but to postpone the shoot. Frequently in TAR, and the Tibetan areas of China, regulations on travel change quickly, and Boon-nam had gotten word that access for foreigners in many areas of the Eastern Plateau had been restricted in response to Phuntsok's immolation and resulting death. There is a significant effort in Chinese-controlled Tibet to limit the access of foreign journalists from reporting on the realities at play in the region and the flow in information via telephone and Internet are closely watched. We had no choice but to potentially re-schedule our shoot for August, 2011 when all of our crew would be available again. We had conjectured that vulture chicks would likely hatch in the spring and begin taking their first early flights throughout May. We would now most certainly miss the fledging season for

gyps himalayensis and the charismatic interactions that go along with this period for the birds, but we had no other choice.

During the time spent waiting for the political situation in Tibet to stabilize, I was offered a production contract job from National Geographic Television. The job was to work as a camera assistant on an upcoming shoot in Alaska where the team I would join, would try to film Golden Eagles preying upon newborn Dahl Sheep lambs. The production would spend nearly the entire month of June in the Alaska Mountain Range above tree line, based out of tents. It seemed like the perfect opportunity to gain some invaluable experience for what I might face in Asia. I agreed to do the shoot, and while excited for the opportunity, knew it would be very challenging.

When our Nat Geo crew arrived on location, a couple thousand feet above the nearest tree cover, we swallowed our pride realizing there was still more than three feet of snow where we'd need to camp. This shoot was to provide an excellent experience in suffering for an extended period of time, and was the kind of burden that comes natural to risk taking filmmakers. Knowing I'd probably see this kind of discomfort soon again, I decided to embrace it and grow from it. Our crew spent twenty-eight days climbing at least a 1000 feet a day in pursuit of our eagles. I learned some of the sensitivities involved with filming large birds, and the crew taught me how to earn access by letting the animals grow accustomed to your presence and setting camouflage blinds. We sat on the side of mountains for 12 hours a day, patiently watching herds of Dahl Sheep forage with their newborns, the eagles looking on. We practiced working a larger section of the Mountains by

dividing our crew into two and using radio communication. We wore headsets to keep our noise level down, and the producer/cinematographer who had hired me John Benam the leader of the production, asked us to only wear black, grey, or brown clothing, and stop using scented deodorant. This went on for a month, and as we pushed further into our own exhaustion the eagles never got hungry enough to strike at the lambs.

While disappointing for our crew in Alaska, the experience was incredibly valuable for me as a filmmaker, and I came away with a skepticism for my project that it might be significantly more difficult to film the behaviors at sky burials than we were expecting to find in Tibet. Returning to Texas, Lis and I reconnected with Boon-nam and kept everything moving towards an August shoot. Having completed my experience in the field I made some adjustments to our equipment needs and arranged for Boon-nam to rent a full sized four wheel drive SUV, obtain a petroleum generator to keep our equipment running should we need to work remotely, and ordered long range radios for everyone onboard. We were as ready as we could get and counted the days until August 1st.

PRODUCTION

With almost a year and a half of anticipation leading into our shoot, my nerves were on high alert, but I was ready to get into the field and confront the experiences and discovery that awaited us. Our basic plan was that Drew and I would fly from Austin, Texas to Chengdu, the capital of the Sichuan Province in China and the gateway to Tibet, where we would join up with Lis. Upon arrival, we intended to spend only enough time in Chengdu to assemble our crew, procure any final supplies, and head up onto the Plateau to encounter our film.

Drew and I successfully made our way to Chengdu, and without any trouble at all, our equipment made the journey as well. Chinese customs didn't provide any hiccups, and suddenly we were in China with the tools necessary to try and do some important work. We had not anticipated this ease, and within a couple minutes I finally got to meet Boon-nam in person. When he offered to carry our bags to our four-wheel drive Mitsubishi Pajero, I felt like we were in the committed hands of a professional. We had to spend a day in Chengdu before Lis's flight would arrive and Drew and I practiced reciting our Chinese tourist destinations, not knowing what lay ahead of us, or the full realities of the political landscape. We quickly turned away from communicating with other foreigners. In our first day in country an American man asked us what we were doing with our camera bags, and we told him we were photographers. The vague answer didn't appease him and he tried to pry something more substantial from us. We kept to our bird watching narrative and tried not to get into conversations.

The next day Lis arrived from Toronto via Shanghai. This was the first time I had seen her in person since our meeting in New York six months ago. We were a crew of four and soon Tsering joined us for lunch. It was an exciting feeling to realize that up until now, our efforts to fly in under the radar with the necessary people and equipment to produce an ambitious documentary film had gone un-noticed, or were at least not intervened upon. The real test would be getting set up in Tibet, but for now we had reached a certain milestone. As we were finally meeting in person and unfiltered conversation was possible, the five of us were now capable of speaking completely in the open about our specific plans for the film. The nerves involved in this process of playing my visions for a film against the realities of the world would return again to us in postproduction, but with Tsering as our guide, his sensitivities of the local culture would insure that we wouldn't make a film disgracing his ethics, and therefore ours. That is to say it was fundamental for us not to exploit our subjects expose them to political questioning. This communication was however very difficult as I now began to confront the very real unlikeliness that I would get the kind of access in a month to make the film I had envisioned. Talking in person, Tsering offered his advice that under almost no circumstances should we expect to get access to someone near death who would agree to appear in the film. I feared that this outcome had always been a possibility, and the concept that we had been building for eighteen months began to dissolve. We didn't yet embrace it, but we were now certainly on the path to discovering our film in the real world, as opposed to imposing our concepts upon it.

The next day we began the two-day drive from Chengdu westward into the mountains that make up the Eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau. Our gear and five people packed tightly into an SUV, we decided only to drive during daylight hours as the roads in the Sichuan Province, and for the most part many places in China, have a notorious safety record. On our first day of driving we made it as far west as the small town of Songpan. It is certainly a Tibetan area, but the most of what we could find were small shops with signs in Mandarin selling cell phone accessories and jewelry. We were anxious to continue to the trip. The next morning we departed Songpan before the sun fully rose in hopes of leaving the string of tour busses and vacationers behind us. Within a couple hours we had made our way onto the Plateau and the rocky peaks gave way to rolling hills and expansive grasslands. To our surprise, almost immediately we spotted a dark cloud circling upward on the horizon. It was our first griffon vulture sighting, probably 40-50 of them circling a carcass. It was probably at least a mile ahead, and we pulled over to take in the sight.

Standing on the side of the road Drew and Tsering got into a conversation about a series of colorful tents with cars parked all around them. Drew had asked if these were Tibetan nomad tents, to which there was not an easy answer. Tsering had grown up as nomad in Amdo. His family herded yak and moved their camp with the seasons. Tsering had told us the day before that nomads have a unique smell, and that in the last several years he had lost his living in Chengdu. I wasn't sure if he was being metaphorical about his current identity, but despite this, Tsering was a nomad in his blood and he carried a strange tension with him in talking about this colorful tent. He told us that while run by nomads this tent was not authentic, that

they were not real nomads, and that it was a part of a show. The cars all belonged to travelers on vacation who had stopped at the tent for an "authentic" Tibetan lunch and to watch "traditional" dances. Tsering had not been up in the Plateau for at least the six months prior and appeared outwardly affected by seeing the colorful tent. He informed us that nomad tents are traditionally made from yak wool, and are therefore usually black in color and sit low to the ground. This tent was made from a manufactured vinyl and PVC pipe boasting bright blue and yellow designs. It would take nearly a year to embrace an understanding of the conflict in Tsering's eyes, and it would eventually become the core of my work as a filmmaker in Tibet. For the time being this tent was just one of many complications of a politically charged landscape.

As we neared Taktsang Lhamo that same day it seemed as if there were concepts for films manifesting themselves everywhere I looked, and none of them had a thing to do with sky burial or griffon vultures. On the grasslands, we passed basketball courts being reclaimed by the landscape and massive brick factories that had to be helmed by an army of laborers; enticing curiosities to follow on a different trip, but for the time being our purpose was to get to Taktsang Lhamo and conduct a thorough survey of the prospects there. Several miles outside the town we caught up with the cloud of vultures we'd seen an hour earlier. They were enormous birds in person and the sounds they made consuming a dead horse were like some sort of echo from a primordial age. We tried to steal several shots of them near the side of the road, but they took to flight soon after we approached. This was already more

material than I had gotten in Alaska two months prior and for that I was optimistic. We continued on and arrived in Taktsang Lhamo.

Our crew immediately checked in at a hostel for a period of a couple days. Drew, Lis, and I were excited just to walk around the town soaking up the elements of our canvas. Arriving at dusk we had only an hour or so until the daylight faded, but it was enough time to recognize a complicated community. From a distance it is one of the most beautiful town's I'd ever seen and was reminiscent to me of Telluride, Colorado nestled between a number of stunning peaks. Upon closer look however, the town was filthy. A natural spring runs from the valley above town through the main street of Taktsang Lhamo, which is used by all purposes as the trash collection service, fresh water supply, and wastewater runoff. I noticed in the running water the carcass of what I thought was a dead cat, an IV bag, plastic containers, and an old mattress. Tsering told us that throughout many parts of Tibet, the culture had not adapted to using non-biodegradable products, where before anything thrown on the ground would be gone in a month or so. Continuing our initial walk through, the town was simply crowded with tourists. Most lodges were completely booked and Chinese tour busses dominated the main street. At the same time as tourists were shopping freely in the streets and taking pictures, there was a palpable presence of the People's Liberation Army, the Chinese Military force. On a daily basis they would march in numbers up to 100 through the streets chanting loudly. It was an eerie feeling to see people on vacation knowing they were on freshly colonized and contested ground. The sun set on our first day on location and Tsering had already made contact with several monks at the Taktsang Lhamo Kirti

Monastery. He had told the monks the intention of our visit and they tipped him off that there would likely be a sky burial early the next morning. An event I expected to spend the entire month chasing down was presenting itself to us before we even had time to unpack our bags. We readied our equipment and got prepared to shoot should this be the only burial we were able to film.

In our communications with Tsering, Lis and I were concerned that our intentions to respect the sacred nature of the sky burial was communicated to the monks at the monastery. We didn't want to try and negotiate access, as we knew we'd be there another month still, and we wanted to develop the foundation of a relationship with these contacts. My conscious was telling me that something seemed far too easy about this, but Tsering let us know it would be fine if we wanted to witness the burial the next morning.

At a Tibetan sky burial, the family of the deceased does not attend. Rather, other men in one's community carry out the burial. These people are called roghpas. They don't perform sky burials as a trade, but more so as a favor to the family suffering the loss of a loved one. For these reasons under normal conditions, there are usually no more than four to five attendants. In the case of a young death, often there are a number of monks who also attend the burial reciting mantra intended to gather merit for the deceased and help usher their soul into the next life. As a filmmaker, I didn't yet know how we would interface with the family mourning the loss of a loved one, but I took the lead of Tsering whose communication with the presiding monastery seemed to be ushering us to the burial ground.

At 4:30am the next morning Tsering knocked on our door, telling us that the burial would go on as scheduled. Our crew of five grabbed our equipment and walked out into the darkness of the early morning towards the burial ground about a mile outside Taktsang Lhamo. We walked for about twenty minutes, winding our way up a hillside to the site now just coming in to light. It was here our crew made the most impacting discovery of our experiences in Tibet. Even earlier than we had departed, there were already droves of people walking along the grounds of this sacred site. I didn't yet know who these people were, but there were what seemed like at least 100 of them. As we got closer, and realized they were taking pictures against the will of the roghpas and monks, the look I had seen on Tsering's face the previous day at the nomad tent returned with a new severity. Lis, Drew, and I were concerned to take out our cameras, risking the danger of joining the masses of tourists, but Tsering again said we should feel welcomed to do so.

In what felt like a frenzy Drew and I began filming the burial. On this day we had brought two cameras to cover more ground, and as luck would have it, what we shot over the next hour would eventually become the material that made up over 70% of our film. Initially we filmed the burial for what we had hoped it to be. Navigating around Chinese tourists walking in every direction we made framing choices that edited them out of the world. Drew's camera zoomed in to capture the details of the griffons waiting to be fed human flesh, as I filmed them still arriving from the distant peaks. Very soon however, our ambitions to show the burial for what we thought it was were overcome by the harsh realities of what a Tibetan sky burial really looked like in the summer of 2011. We could no longer keep the

tourists out of our frame. They would unsentimentally walk in front of our cameras, laughing and telling jokes, and for a brief period of time, this interaction intensely tested our resolve. We finally gave in, threw our hands up, and widened out our lenses to show the reality of what was happening on this morning at a 200 year-old burial site outside Taktsang Lhamo. We filmed the remains of a young man killed in a car accident just days earlier being fed to more than 100 griffon vultures, and we captured about the same number of tourists feeding upon the fascination of a burial ritual they made fun of and took pictures of in a disrespectful way.

What we didn't know was that the events of this morning were not uncommon by any means, and had rather been an expected norm for a number of years already. What was more, all of these tourists had paid an admission fee to watch this private event, not attended by the family of the deceased. It was a confusing interaction beyond our immediate comprehension. To add another layer to our experience on this morning was the role we played in the documentation of the burial. While we had spoken with officials at the Kirti Monastery about attending, and had chosen to film the broader reality of the event and were not laughing or spitting on prayer flags like our tourist counterparts, we did participate in the milieu of a ceremony that was one man's final impact on the physical world. While we had operated with what felt like respectful ethics, the fact that we were now apart of the media politics surrounding Tibet was undeniable.

It had been a confusing morning, and when we returned back to our lodge we put the cameras away for the day in hopes of making more established inroads with the monastery. We went to sleep that night with almost a month of production

ahead of us still, and most all of the footage already that would eventually make up my film Vultures of Tibet.

The second morning of our experience in Taktsang Lhamo had more in the way of surprises in store for our crew. Over breakfast we heard murmurs that the town was shutting out foreigners and all hotels and lodges would be barred from hosing them. Boon-nam and Tsering confirmed this, and within a number of hours we would be forced to leave Taktsang Lhamo. What we would come to learn was that the Panchen Lama, the second highest lama in Tibetan Buddhism was visiting a township nearby in Amdo. This Panchen Lama, recognized by the Chinese Government, is not however equally celebrated by Tibetans. In 1995 the Tibetan Panchen Lama, age six, was imprisoned and disappeared by the Chinese. He has not been heard from over the last seventeen years, and in his stead the Chinese have appointed their own Panchen Lama. This is an issue of great significance amongst Tibetans, and for this reason, the Chinese Government in Tibet is on high alert for protest when the current Panchen Lama visits. For as long as he could, Drew filmed snapshots of Taktsang Lhamo from behind our hotel window, and we were soon forced to leave.

At this point we didn't have an idea what the arc of our film would be, but presumed we'd be better off to try and ride out the political storm camping outside of town, than to travel to a different part of Tibet all together. We packed up our gear and followed a dirt road out of Taktsang Lhamo, around the mountains that surround it, and into a protected canyon, about a forty-five minute drive from the town center. Luckily we were prepared to work out of a campsite and began digging

in for an indefinite amount of time. We unloaded our petroleum generator, charged our batteries, and stated strategizing how to make the most of our time.

As we knew that to some degree of detail, we would want to film the griffons in their natural environment, we had tried to pick a campsite that we thought would put us within range of nest sites. We followed Boon-nam's recommendation on picking our site, as he had claimed to know where exactly we could find nests to film. After a day of surprises, we should have expected that Boon-nam's knowledge of viable nest locations was an act of rounding up at the least, and so we went along on our first vulture scout only to find that Boon-nam had only presumed vultures must be living in the cliffs around Taktsang Lhamo. This was disheartening to say the least. From our experience at National Geographic, Lis and I both knew it could take years to find active nests that not only hatch chicks, but are practical to film. There's no other way to express it, but we were upset. On the other side of things however, Boon-nam had trusted our intentions enough to put his own identity and safety on the line for our film, and without him we would never have found Tsering or gotten to Taktsang Lhamo. Without these two men, three Westerners with cameras in Tibet had absolutely no business making a film there. We bit our lip and eagerly looked amongst the cliffs for signs of nesting birds.

To Boon-nam's credit, there did seem to be an incredibly dense population of griffons amongst the cliffs we were looking. While we hadn't found any nests, nor did we know exactly know where to look, both Boon-nam and Tsering worked tirelessly along side the three of us to find a viable nest. This process occupied our efforts for the next three days. Somewhere early in the mix Drew spotted a two

vulture nests a mere 200 meters out of our campsite. In passing on the way back into camp he set his tripod and captured a griffon landing in the nest, poking around for a few minutes, and taking to flight again. As the nest was in our backyard we presumed there had to be a far greater option further out in the mountains somewhere. In total we spent nearly a week looking for birds to film and never got a closer look into a nest than Drew captured in that moment within earshot of our tents.

There was no fresh water at our camp, and the five-gallon drum we had filled up before leaving Taktsang Lhamo was now near empty. We had not choice but to return to town and fill up the tank. Lis and Drew had been searching vigorously for nests, and we decided to give them the day off while Boon-nam, Tsering, and myself went back into Taktsang Lhamo for water and food supplies. When we arrived in town it was apparent that the hotels were still barred from housing foreigners, and so we were committed to reaming at the camp. We didn't waste any time procuring our supplies and were soon back on the dirt road out to our campsite. It was clear at this point that I was not making the film I had spent so much time fundraising for. I was making what I could, confronting the realities of working in Tibet. This was difficult for everyone on the crew and without the support of each other we would have all independently collapsed under the uncertainties of moving forward in the dark.

About a half-mile outside our camp we came across two Tibetan men on motorcycles waiting by the side of the road. These men flagged us down and we stopped to talk with them. One was wearing a sword on his belt, and they quickly

blocked the path of our vehicle with their bikes. They had realized that we were camping on the winter pasture grounds for their yak, and they demanded that we pay them 300 Chinese yuan if we wanted to stay there any longer. I was not upset at these men for making this claim. In the years prior the Chinese had built toll roads and bridges all throughout Tibet forever changing it's landscape. We could in fact see one of them from the spot we were all standing, and to move about their own land Tibetans are being charged these high tolls. As an offer of good will, I gave them the money, and they offered to give us a crop of fresh yak yogurt in return. Had we of seen this demand in a different light I think we would have missed a great opportunity. This family of nomads became very friendly towards us. They later allowed us to film the normal ebb and flow of their life, and introduced us to a number of other subjects in the grasslands. Upon returning to camp, and telling our story, it became clear that the men had made an attempt to offer their terms to Lis and Drew while we were out. Unable to communicate with each other, the nomads had patiently waited for our return, and we had made what resembled something of a friendship.

Our crew spent another two days poking around for the prospect of five star natural history footage. After a courageous push on Drew's behalf, of setting a camouflage blind before dusk one day, which did result is some charismatic material that found a place in the final film, we decided that the heart of our narrative was getting away from us and that we either needed to get back into Taktsang Lhamo or move on to another community. Fortunately, the political turmoil over housing foreigners had moved on, and we were ready to take up working in the town again.

Considering that our presence in the town was bound to be noticed, as we were maybe three of five total Westerners in Taktsang Lhamo at the time and had our own Tibetan guide, we decided to stay as close as we could to the police authorities. We wanted them to acknowledge us right away, grow accustom to us, and move on. It sounded as good as any plan.

We ended up booking rooms in a hotel literally right next to the police station. Our windows were not more than fifteen feet form the offices keeping tabs on the political activities of the monks in town, and here were trying to make a film about all of it right on their doorstep. We weren't sure our stay in Taktsang Lhamo would outlast the curiosities of the local police, and so we tried to start working quickly.

My idea for a film at this point was to create a portrait of this small Tibetan town undergoing great economic, political, and ecological change. I thought that perhaps if we could follow characters from birth to old age in an observational way, through the normal activities of their lives, that it would offer a breadth in understanding the Tibetan experience of this town. As we had already filmed a sky burial I thought we had successfully shot the ending. In retrospect, this idea was an unavoidable trap that I fell into, only to be dug out of my months of translations to make sense of material I would never use, and more money than I would care to acknowledge. What else could we have done however? Even with the commitment of keeping identities anonymous Tibetans are afraid to speak on camera, as such a thing itself is a prosecutable political activity. The voices at our meeting in New York the previous year were echoing quite loudly in my thoughts.

We began collecting portraiture style images of the town and the sky burial site. We looked for the kinds of images that spoke to the change facing the area. Construction cranes and hotels rising over mud houses, cell phone towers constructed behind prayer flags. They were interesting images, but not the fundamental content of a film. Keeping our head up was very difficult, as doing this kind of filming required a high level of vigilance on our part not the alert the authorities of our presence.

It's likely we would have continued on this path, however Tsering suggested that he might be able to put us in touch with several people from the town who he thought would be willing to talk to us on camera. It was an exciting prospect and we told him that speaking with the people directly involved in the sky burials would be of great interest to us. Within the day Tsering had set up three interviews for us, and these became the backbone of Vultures of Tibet. Tsering had arranged for us to speak with a man who had worked as a roghpa roughly eighteen times, and two high scholars within the monastic community.

One of the great challenges of this project has been considering the anonymity of our sources and taking the proper measures to protect them. In these interviews we made some important choices on this front and agreed only to film their hands for some, and for others we would only collect audio recordings. Despite these limitations, the interviews were all very powerful on a historic and spiritual level, and all of these men, at least to some degree of specificity expressed their sentiments about some Chinese policies in the town and at the burials. Between

these interviews and the sky burial we had already filmed, our crew completed the two most important days of our production.

While we were in Tibet, as a filmmaker, it was my goal to make a purely observational film driven by characters on screen telling their own story. It was because of this demand I had for myself, that I didn't immediately recognize the significance of the work we had just done. The remaining time we had in Taktsang Lhamo was spent working further on the portrait of a town through the goal of onscreen characters. Perhaps it was the fog of war, made no easier by the fact that Tibetans started opening their doors to us, but we began filming average people in their normal way of life around Taktsang Lhamo. Over the next nine days we probably shot 30 hours of footage we couldn't really show for reasons of character anonymity. I cannot explain why we all thought this was the best approach, other than the fact that it seemed like the only approach.

Looking at what has made the final cut in my completed film, most all of the materials were not things our crew sought out. Rather they were moments of pent up emotion that our subjects chose to share with us, or exploitations part of me feels I shouldn't have seen. This was not a film we could plan in pre-production, or even fully seek out ethically in production. It was an ordeal we had to wait out and survive, trying to grasp at the gifts of 'truth' as they frenzied past us.

As the days went on, and under the spell of what I thought was captivating and useful observational footage, we were now at a spot where we thought we could see the remaining few holes in our film. We had filmed babies and old women, and almost everything in-between, but we still didn't have any real footage of monks

living their normal life nor any truly emotive material of vultures in close up at the sky burial. We decided we'd have to shoot another sky burial or we might regret it in the editing room. Tsering put the wheels in motion again, communicating with the monastery, and within two days our crew was back at the burial site at dawn, camera in hand. This turned out to be a good instinct, and the footage that came from this particular morning constructed almost the entire opening of the film in the long run. This was another huge success for working with a capable crew. On this day I had gotten quite ill, and while I was throwing up into a toilet with no plumbing, Lis, Drew, and our guides were bringing our project to life.

With the new footage of a second sky burial on our hard drives, and only and handful of days left in Tibet, we thought the best chance we had to pull a meaningful film together out of the material we had collected was to try and film within the monastic community. Having already done interviews with several monks in Taktsang Lhamo, and confronting how difficult it had been to navigate issues of anonymity, we figured that we might have more luck if we traveled to the home town of our guide a couple hundred kilometers away, Tankur. For all of its political musings, and out of fears that we were overstaying our welcome in Taktsang Lhamo, we left. I would deeply regret this in a year, piecing our film together in the editing room, but I didn't yet have the perspective to make a better choice as a storyteller, and we departed from the world of our film. Despite our attempts, nothing that passed though our cameras from this point forth would end up in the film.

After about a four-hour drive we arrived in Tankur and went immediately to the Monastery there. Expecting to land in an area with less political tension than Taktsang Lhamo, I was moved and taken aback by the first person we came into contact with. Tsering introduced us to his cousin, who just a year earlier had been released as a political prisoner. I could believe by the way this man carried himself; he looked like he'd been tortured. Tsering told us that four years ago he was accused of spreading dissenting propaganda against the government, to which he was then jailed for three years. In that time he was often forced to sit in a chair day after day staring into a light bulb. This was a sobering reminder of the severity of the world we were working in. There were testimonies on the hard drives we were carrying that directly criticized the Chinese Government's attempt to make money off of sky burial. It was imperative that we maintained control of our material and not trip in the last chapter of our production. It was my instinct to keep a healthy distance from Tsering's cousin. The last thing he needed was to get tied up working with us.

While Tsering touched base with his contacts within the monastery, Lis, Drew, and I stood at the headwaters of the Yellow River strategizing how else to spend the last forty-eight hours of our production. The ground on which we were standing is considered to be some of the most majestic in all of China. In this location the Yellow River winds back and forth on itself thirteen times, and is featured on postcards all though out Tibet. I don't know if I regret keeping our cameras off or not, but we weren't there trying to make a picturesque film about Tibet. We wanted to tell the real story.

Tsering came back to us and invited us for tea with some of his contacts at the monastery and his uncle. No one had talked about our film yet, and we were simply there for the company. Tsering's uncle showed us a copy of an ethics guidebook that had been distributed, from my understanding, to nearly all the monasteries in Tibet. He balked at it in a sincere defiance. Several hours went by, and it came to be that one of these monks agreed to let us film with him the following morning. He was going to leave his small house around 6:00am to begin his studies and prayers for the day, but he invited us to show up at 5:30am. We had to agree that if we filmed him in his normal routine not to show his face in any of our images. We agreed and prepared for the next morning.

When we arrived at his home, on what we didn't know yet to be our last day of shooting, this monk was washing his face and heating a kettle of water for tea. It was minutia, but it was the only ethical material we could seem to ask for access on. We watched this man try to make a fire in his stove for about ten minutes, answer a phone call from Tsering, and recite a brief mantra. Before we knew it we he had to carry on with his day, and we had to leave before the sun came up, as to not be seen with cameras in his home. We had cut our production in Taktsang Lhamo short by several days so that we could get a shot of a Tibetan monk making a fire in his living room stove. Looking back on the shoot I regret not pushing further with our presence in Taktsang Lhamo, even if only to film the tourist presence in the town on a higher level. I'm thankful for the lesson making this decision provided me as a filmmaker; it, and many like it on this shoot have helped me hone my senses on knowing when to double down on a pursuit, and when to cut my losses.

We arrived back at the hotel we were lodged at in Tankur, and Boon-nam, Tsering went out for a morning walk while the rest of us rested. On their way back they saw three Chinese police cars waiting outside of our hotel. We we're pretty sure there weren't any other guests at the hotel, and the both of them managed to sneak back in. They came to our room and informed us of the situation. They also now took the liberty to tell us that they were fairly certain their cell phones had been tapped for the last weeks, and that Tsering had actually been approached by a secret police officer in Taktsang Lhamo when a yelling match broke out between a monk and a police officer at the gate of the Kirti Monastery. Living and working in a place like Tibet there is a healthy wave of paranoia that seems to cycle through every several days. We could only assume that this represented very real world concerns from our guides, but as outsiders it was like living a vicarious nightmare. The only thing we could do was wait. We weren't sure the police were staking out the hotel, although it certainly felt that way, and in response Tsering got nervous enough that had to try and sleep to calm himself. Three hours passed and finally the police moved on.

We decided that any last shooting we would do on the film would only be supplemental to a project about sky burial, griffon vultures, and observational life in a different Tibetan town 200 kilometers away. We called the shoot, hoping to use what we'd already captured, and we made ourselves ready to return to Chengdu the next morning.

As we prepared to smuggle our material out of China and back to The States, we didn't know yet if we had achieved a film. There was no fanfare or great feeling

of accomplishment as Drew and I parted ways with Lis in Chengdu. The feeling was mostly that we were glad our entire crew had made it through the past four weeks unscathed. We were incredibly grateful for the sacrifices and absolute commitment from Boon-nam and Tsering. It was time however to leave China and begin the process of understanding what we had done there.

POSTPRODUCTION

In the standard postproduction of a documentary film, footage usually trickles in one shoot at a time, and in small sections. This usually helps the director narrow their vision as they continue to work in the field. We did not have that luxury on this project, and instead we returned from China and Tibet with over forty hours of footage, much of which was in two languages that I didn't speak. Given the nature of our production, from which Drew and I lost significant weight on, much of our footage was significantly different from what I thought I would encounter, and very little of it was actually about sky burials and griffon vultures at all. I was in a spot where I could make something reductive and incredibly simple from our material, but it would mean I would have to be ok with the mystery of never fully understanding our experiences there, or I could take the long road and translate and organize every hour of footage we shot in the hopes of raising some important questions of the dynamics at play in Tibet and around the world. Making this commitment was the first step in creating a psychology about my approach as a director in postproduction. I acknowledged that simply to watch all of our material and organize it would be an immense undertaking, and that it was unlikely that I would find an editor who would be able to commit to working on a project like this, pro-bono, for an extended amount of time. I prepared myself for the journey, which meant I would get to know our material inside and out, and that hopefully in the later stages of editing, my subconscious mind would be making decisions for me. There was a lot of groundwork to do before then however.

As we shot our film digitally all of our material needed to be transcoded so that I could start working with it, and play it back in the non-linear editing application I chose to use. As is one common practice working with digital SLR cameras, I chose to transcode our footage to the Apple ProRes 422 codec which mitigated the amount of hard drive space I would need to store everything, and provided the highest quality images I could hope to get out of the cameras we used. With forty hours of footage, this process took a number of days in early September 2011.

Considering that I was going to edit the film myself, I chose to use Final Cut Pro version 7 (FCP) as my application of choice. I was already very comfortable navigating the software and committing ideas to a timeline quickly. As we already had a mountain of work to do I didn't want to complicated matters by learning a new application. In hindsight this was probably a mistake. I will be very surprised if I choose to use FCP again on a future project considering the number of glitches, and system crashes it yielded in my workflow. Additionally it has a number of limitations integrating with other professional workflows on the sound mixing, coloring, and finishing side of post. If I had it to do again I likely would have chosen to work in AVID Media Composer, but FCP did bring the project through to the finish line.

Once the material had been transcoded, it was ready to be brought into FCP organized by calendar days. While in the field our team had kept a log a of what had been shot on any given day, and this proved to be very helpful in trying to integrate to a more narratively driven system of organization. My goal was to organize

footage by type, character, and event; and then give every moment of our material a general rating of value to me from 1-4. A shot rated 1, was very unlikely to end up in the film on it's own merit; whereas a 4 is a shot I would consider building an entire sequence around. Before any of this could be done I needed to separate out from our footage all the material that needed to be translated in an efficient way. As it would be expensive to hire both Mandarin and Tibetan translators I only wanted to send them material that needed their work, so that they weren't watching any footage extraneously. This broke down to me making a series of eighteen videos I called 'translation reels'. These reels were originally organized by cutting out any moments from the raw material that did not have speaking content and applying a yellow visual filter to every moment I wanted translated. The videos also included a running timecode, so that I would be able to re-link the translations to the raw material once they were done.

The translation on this project was a very long process, which began in September 2011, and didn't officially wrap up until November 2012. While Lis was looking for translators to collaborate with I was trying to get all our translation reels ready to send out. Finding a Mandarin translator was not all to difficult and we had this person working on the film by the middle of November 2011, but the search for a Tibetan collaborator was much more challenging. Most of what we shot in Tibet that needed translation was in Tibetan. Additionally we needed to find someone who would be willing to work on this project for a number of months, fit our budget, and who spoke good enough English to provide a translation I could begin editing with. We began this search by looking into established translation companies, but

quickly found this route cost prohibitive to go down. I reached out to Tibetan organizations around The States finding several leads, but all resulted in dead ends or people who couldn't commit to the bulk amount of material we had. Through a contact Lis had in the film industry in Canada, she was put in touch with a man I'll refer to here as Tashi, based out of Vancouver. Tashi it turns out had worked on a number of Hollywood films as a cultural advisor for projects with Tibetan characters, and was familiar with the kind of deadlines and workflow we might need to work with. It also worked out that Lis took a new job in Vancouver and was soon literally lived on the same block as Tashi. He agreed to meet with us, Lis pitched him the project, we negotiated a rate, and he was soon working on the first of our Tibetan translation reels in December of 2011.

Once we had gotten Tashi working on our translations, I hadn't expected it, but we still had a good deal of trouble shooting to do in order to make the process really work for us. What I wanted as a director and editor were specific timecodes with accuracy with less than a second of placement error, so that I could make informed decisions in my edits. Some of the early translations we got back from Tashi were accurate language wise, but their placement in a timeline had up to five second of drift, and that made it very difficult for me to edit with. Working with our material had a number of challenges involved for a translator as the person speaking was not always on screen, and at times (as we didn't understand many of the interactions we were shooting), it was difficult for Tashi to make out the context of an interaction. Our progress was slowing, it was already February of 2012, and I

couldn't even start ranking footage until it had gotten back to me in an accurate translated state.

Lis and I decided that instead of trouble shooting our workflow one email at a time that I should come to Vancouver from Austin to sit down with Tashi for a good focused week and get us going on an efficient path. I grabbed my passport again and headed up to Canada for a week of intensive translating on a two-hour section of footage we never used. What we did manage to create however was an efficient workflow that allowed Tashi to work directly in Final Cut Pro, as opposed to sending me transcribed text in Microsoft Word. Previously Tashi would watch a video, listen closely, and when he heard something he could translate he would write down the timecode and corresponding text. He spent much of his time transcribing numbers and we missed a lot of material. The advice I had gotten from some other filmmakers who had worked with translations was to do most of this work on paper, but it seemed counter intuitive to me to do it that way. I didn't want to just read what our subjects were talking about, I wanted to be able to rate their testimonies in the context of a given scenario with their own voice. This realization allowed my to throw out using transcribed text all together.

What Tashi and I devised was that we would do all of our translation work right from within Final Cut Pro. Instead of sending him a video him confusing yellow flashes ever time I wanted to see a translation, I instead would send him a video and a corresponding Final Cut Pro project file and timeline. The timeline would then have a series of markers on it that I had made when I was looking for a translation. Now, all Tashi had to do what simply scroll to these markers, and when he could get

the English translation, he would simply write it into the text box of each marker. As well, we used a color system in the labeling of our markers. What Tashi was able to translate was colored purple, what he wasn't we colored orange.

The week I spent in Vancouver was instrumental in both getting Tashi and I on an efficient workflow as well as allowing me a chance to communicate my passion for this project. Without people like Tashi, Tsering, and Boon-nam this film could not have been made, and for the time we would need Tashi's help, it was in our best interested to show him why this film needed to be made. Not only was Tashi now working as our postproduction translator, he was more so our postproduction cultural guide, providing further context of the events we had observed and a clearer understand of the politics at play in Tibet. It was a high priority for us to respect the efforts of Tashi, and we made sure that our fundraising kept his invoices as current as possible. I returned again to Austin and the Tibetan translation reels began to make their way down to me one by one.

As each reel arrived I would convert the text that Tashi had written into each marker and convert it into a text block that would appear on screen over each moment. This was a tedious process that required a lot of early work in my overall post experience, but once it was up and running it allowed me a lot of flexibility as the translations could then move freely along with their corresponding video in FCP. Once I had created text blocks for each translation, then I needed to re-link my paired down translation reel back to the raw footage, as I had taken all non speaking moments out, and then I could finally start rating and organizing. The language

element of this film was a major hurdle in production and post, and is largely the reason it has taken me close to three years to realize this project.

I knew that I would want to look at every moment in the film before I started making editorial choices, even if on a general level, and so as translated footage made its way in, it was important for my process not to look too far into the future and just make sure I did the organizational work properly. That is to say it's difficult to stay patient with an edit and not start cutting sequences just because I wanted to see something on screen. Even though I certainly did want that, I didn't want to enter territory where I was unsure what stones were yet to be unturned.

Even though Tashi and I had established a reliable workflow for the project in February, it was not until June of 2012 that we were able to work though all of the material on a first pass. As I had been ranking footage as the translation reels reached me, by the time I got the final reels in June, all of the organizational prep had been done on the film in it's current state. We had been in postproduction already for ten months, and now we could start editing.

For me as the editor and director of this film the summer of 2012 was spent almost entirely behind a computer screen confronting the mistakes, and some of the successes I had made in the field nearly a year earlier. What made things even more challenging is that I was doing this by myself. As I director I couldn't now look at our material from a distance, develop an opinion about it, and set some goals for an editor. Rather I needed to create the plan, and fight all those battles in the trenches of the edit as well.

By the end of June I though I had reached my first iteration of a rough cut on this film. I starting showing what I thought would be an emotive experience of a Tibet very few people know about, but this was not the response I got from these early viewings. As a storyteller I was still committed to all the choices I made in the field as a director. I had spent 70% of my time in Tibet shooting a film that created of portrait of Taktsang Lhamo through footage with very little sense of character, and I was still hoping this would say something meaningful about the forces at play there. It simply didn't. The footage was beautiful, but it was very hard to relate to as an audience, it was more so a canvas for a viewer to project their own beliefs about a place like Tibet onto. This message finally hit home when I showed this cut to my executive producer Gary Newsom, and while he knew I had something important to communicate with my work, he was pretty sure I hadn't done it yet.

This was a very difficult thing to confront as an independent filmmaker. I had now spent more money than I care to talk about on a month long production undercover in the disputed region of Eastern Tibet/Western China. I had spent close to an equal amount of money and ten months of my life committed to my concept of a portrait, and it was clearly not working. This is not to suggest that any documentary films completely work at a rough cut phase, I would expect that very seldom is this the case, it but it was now clear to me that the rough cut was not the problem, it was my entire approach as a director. I began to question the fundamental story I was trying to tell.

Looking at all the issues we'd had in the field with media politics and censorship issues, it occurred to me that perhaps the only perspective I could

rightfully access was my own. Perhaps, the film I had on my hands had more to do with my process as a filmmaker than it did the world I was investigating. I didn't like the words coming out of my mouth, but I was afraid I might be right. I spent some time with this idea, and screened the documentary film by Ross McElwee Sherman's March (1986). In the film, Ross sets out to make a documentary about the impact of General Sherman's bloody march though the Confederate South during the end of the Civil War, and how its echoes are felt today. He ends up tracing these steps, but his process as a filmmaker far trumps his concept of general Sherman, and the fundamental narrative of the film evolves into a question of his personal love life. I respect Ross as a filmmaker, but I found his project a little taxing to watch and I really didn't want to make a film like this. I sincerely felt that making something like this would have been my failure to communicate something larger than myself, and that's not why I went to Tibet or asked other people to put their own safety on the line. I wasn't sure yet how I would pull this project out of the hat, but I was not going to make a personal narrative.

It was now July of 2012 and I believe I took a weekend or more off from working on the film. I had been firing on all cylinders for months, and for a couple days I forgot that I was making a film, enjoyed my first wedding anniversary, and went camping. When I'd had a chance to clear my mind I returned again to the conversation I'd had with Gary a month before. He asked my why I had been using the work title for the film "The Vulture Project", and the answer seemed rather obvious. I was making a film about griffon vultures at sky burials, only what I had discovered after going to Tibet was that we as people often act as ravenous as the

way we think about vultures on a carcass. I had not only witnessed an ancient burial tradition, I had witnesses it's exploitation and the mediated international voyeurism that goes along with understanding a different culture through the push of modernity. The colonization of Tibet had put these forces into motion, and the sky burial was such an incredible anecdote of them. I did have some very strong material on my hands, I just wasn't using it in the right way; and there were still a couple of important pieces I needed.

From the outset I had always been opposed to using interviews. I wanted to make a film that stood on the legs of it's scene work, and also that brought about the kind of context that was necessary for understanding something like sky burial. That's not the film I came back form the field with however, and I needed to accept that reality. I also needed to fully acknowledge that I had not directly made a film about a Tibetan death ritual. I had made a film about voyeurism and the misunderstandings that fuel it. It was likely the most challenging thing I had to do in the overarching process of making this film, but I needed to be ok with not using most of the footage I had shot. Instead the film would be made from the moments that surprised us, the moments we participated in as voyeurs, and the flashes of social honesty that emerged from our interviews. This was the film I needed to make.

It was the middle of July now, and while I was developing an approach carried by the testimonies of our interviews that I thought would hold together as a film, there were still some important limitations to identify. The most important of those was again an issue of anonymity. I would not be able to show the identities of

the people in our interviews. I would either have to show their hands expressing ideas though body language, or not show the subjects at all. To add to that, one of the characters we had film with only had material that showed his face, and another we were not able to film at all, providing only audio recordings. If I were going to use these testimonies, and a visual representation of the subjects, I would need to shoot new subjects to stand in as proxies for those in Tibet. It would be verisimilitude yes, but in a film where we can't see any of the subjects for political reasons I thought it would be important to know that the thoughts within it were coming from real people, and not a script. Additionally, if I were weary enough about showing their faces, what would I do about their voices? I had several colleagues suggest pitch shifting the audio to conceal identities, but I wanted to be careful not to make a cheesy television crime drama, and moreover I didn't want to leave any trail of compelling evidence to link our subjects in Tibet to the film. I wasn't sure how I would navigate this issue, but I would have to confront them soon enough.

I began constructing a new edit of the film exclusively from three of our interviews. Each of these characters I felt brought a unique perspective in illuminating the dynamics at play in Taktsang Lhamo, and for that matter, greater Tibet. My assignment as a director/editor here was to try and isolate which characters would communicate each given idea. In most cases, each of the characters brought forth their own narrative and perspective regarding the greater body of the film, and seldom did I have to consider issues of screen time for a given character. After about a week of diligent work on this new path for the film, a

narrative structure stable enough to support supplemental imagery and scene work started to emerge. The film essentially revealed itself as a classic Greek tragedy. It introduced us to a world or characters that were easy to fall in love with, and then it challenged the audience to participate in their slow metaphorical death.

I open my film in the natural landscape of Tibet and slowly introduce the idea of death and the Tibetan tradition of sky burial. As we progress further into understanding this method for reintegrating the human dead back into the natural world, I complicated the audience's interaction with my film by developing the presence of the tourists we encountered. The film follows a rather simple structure with an ending that I feel brings the larger worldview of these issues into play. Once I could see that this structure was going to provide a navigable engagement with the ideas I wanted to communicate, I needed to start thinking about several additional elements.

It was my intention while in Tibet to capture an image of the Chinese flag flying over an enigmatic slice of the Tibetan landscape. This juxtaposition might not emote for all viewers as it does for me, however with the visibility issues of appearing as a filmmaker while in Tibet, this was never something we did. This idea was now the image I wanted to close the film with, which meant it would play a fundamental role in the final film, and somehow we would need to capture this. I should say that while we were in Tibet, this was not a difficult thing to see, just a difficult thing to film in the way I wanted. I consulted by beliefs on the role of a documentary filmmaker, and I decided that I would re-create this image in the

United States. I got in touch with Drew to see if this sort of thing would work with his schedule, and with him onboard I started making a plan for an additional shoot.

While our team was in Tibet I was surprised at how much Taktsang Lhamo looked like Telluride, Colorado; and I thought I knew a couple places up in the San Juan Mountain Range that I could get to look like Tibet with the right cinematic sensibilities. I bought a Chinese flag, flew to Denver with Drew, rented a truck, built a flagpole, and we hauled it into Southwest Colorado for a photo shoot so to speak. This effort eventually resulted in exactly one shot in the film, the last one, but I feel the investment and time necessary were well worth it. The shot communicates my intention as a director, and I feel it's an honest representation of a condition that exists in Tibet. Looking at the path of a clandestine film, I think taking measure like these are simply a part of the journey. For this purpose Colorado was a good warm up. It was not the last production experience I would have making this film.

Now in September 2012, with the edit of the film solidified enough to share, I got a comment from one of my mentors, PJ Raval, that I should consider taking the film to the place where images taken by tourists end up. He was referring to the Internet, and in so many words to the photos I had seen in my cubicle at National Geographic a number of years earlier. I had now come to understand that the images must have been taken by some variety of tourist, and judging by the photographs themselves which clearly showed the identities of the dead, there was likely little in the way of respectful communication with the Tibetans involved. I brought in the talents of Drew again and we filmed the images that had initially inspired this film off of the screen of a computer. I wanted to do this in a way that acknowledged the

content of the images, but also in an artful way that didn't proliferating the same exploitation set in motion by these photographs. We used a macro lens to bring the viewer close enough to the images to make the pixels of the screen feel tangible. The sequence brings a great juxtaposition to what we might think of as the Tibetan landscape, but I think the point I'm trying to make is that this place, expressed though computer mediated exploitations is perhaps a part of the landscape. I'm very pleased with how the sequence turned out.

The edit of the film progressed as far as I thought I could push it without confronting the looming issue of identities and our interview subjects. To complicate matters, the version of the film I was working with had only passed the scrutiny of a general translation. Before the film was done we would need to reconfirm the accuracy of it's meaning with Tashi. There were a number of variables to consider including also a suggestion from Lis, that if we were to re-record the testimonies in the film, that perhaps we should do it in English to cut back on the level of reading done by the viewer. There were some big choices that needed to be made swiftly. Anticipating this need, Lis had hired an assistant out of Ottawa to help in the recruitment of Tibet people to help us conceal the identities of our subjects. She and our assistant, Fraser White, had done a fairly thorough search for some potential candidates throughout The States and Canada without much success. Our problem was that even if we found someone with strong English and Tibetan skills, we still needed to consult our translator on the dialogue they would record, as this was a relationship we trusted for creative and political considerations. Tashi had left Vancouver for the time being for India and Tibet, and would not return again until

the winter of 2013. What was more, without a cultural in, which we had taken the time to develop with Tashi, it was very difficult to get a commitment from Tibetans we proposed our plans to, even if we had already know them to some degree.

Lis and I both knew what needed to be done, and it was imperative that we could agree on it quickly. We got in touch with Tashi in October 2012, who was living in Dharamsala, India, where the Tibetan Government in Exile is established. Our deadline to finish the film, which was the 2013 film festival schedule, was approaching and having working through the challenges of correspondence translations in the past, we all agreed that we needed to be efficient in finishing the film. We all agreed that the best idea was for me to go to India, meet Tashi in Dharamsala, and over the course of a week we could check the accuracy of the translations, re-record the testimonies of the monks in Taktsang Lhamo with those in India who enjoy a freedom of speech, and perhaps even try to do an English recording. The next day I was in Houston arranging my Indian visa, and before the end of the week I had booked travel to return to Asia for the second time working on my twenty-minute short subject documentary.

The time I spent in India was incredible, and deeply meaningful for the project. I knew that it would have it own degree of challenge, but I was ready to embrace that for what we would gain. By sheer distance it took even longer to travel to Dharamsala from Texas than it did to Taktsang Lhamo, and by the time I reached Tashi, I had been traveling for over three days non-stop. Aside from ensuring we would do an honest job polishing up the translations in the film, Tashi had been in contact with a couple monks from Taktsang Lhamo, who had left Tibet and were

now living in Dharamsala. They agreed to help us re-record the voices in the film and I was very honored to work with them. It was a rare opportunity also to screen the film to the people whose opinion I valued most. I watched the film with these two monks from Taktsang Lhamo and it pleased me more than I can express to hear them thank me for making it. After seeing the film they were committed to helping me get the voices re-recorded, and I even conducted an additional interview with both of them. I had now sat with this topic for years, and finally had to opportunity to ask anything I wanted about it without the fear of persecution for myself or my subjects. Both of these interviews were very powerful and they greatly affected the final shape of the film.

It took my complete focus and organization to schedule the week in Dharamsala with Tashi, but we managed the get the film re-recorded in both Tibetan and English. We shot video to replace the faces of the monks in Tibet, and I got to enjoy some unbelievable views of the Himalayas. To top off my experience, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama was offering a teaching towards the end of my brief stay in Dharamsala, which I got to attend and share the presence of. In total I worked with fifteen Tibetans in a recording studio at the Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts in Dharamsala, and as my week there progressed, these people became one of the most committed film crews I've ever had the chance to work with.

My work in India was complete and it was time to get back to The States and take the final run at completing the edit. Some of our translations had changed which affected the pacing of the film. The monks from Dharamsala had also brought new meaning to my efforts with this film, which I needed to integrate. From the time

I landed back in Texas I had less then a month to improve the edit, perfect the music which had been written by Hanan Townshend, and who I was very lucky to have the chance to work with, do the final sound mix, integrate some visual effects work to clean up a number of shots, do the final color correction, and generate a final credits list. I had anticipated that by the time I neared the finish line on this monster of a short film I would be running on autopilot. I found in reality however that this phase was much harder than anticipated. I missed the life I knew with my wife, my car broke down without the time to fix it, my one pair of jeans gave way, and I may as well have claimed my editing suite as my official address. In this last several weeks I was invited by the Austin Film Society to participate in their "Docs in Progress" as a chance to give my film a trail run before making it's official premier. This was a great opportunity and I met some harsh criticisms which I welcomed and took to heart. I think I came out with a more poignant and commanding film because of it. The next week I was in the mixing suite with Hanan Townshend's music, who had worked on Terrence Malick's Tree of Life (2011) and To the Wonder (2012) and the talents Brad Engleking of Sin City (2005) as a re-recording mixer. The film was soon after colored corrected by Nick Smith with his Austin based company Finland Finish.

I had reached the finish line of a project that demanded a kind of commitment I hadn't known before. It had been the first time I truly worked on a film of my own that was much larger than myself, and more than anything it allowed me to see filmmaking as a process to become the kind of person I'm proud to be, not a result simply to be shown at a number of film festivals. That said, my film has been sent forth to an array of film festivals, markets, and broadcast entities for their

consideration. A new chapter of the project is now just beginning, and I hope it will be several more years before it has run its full course. I won't soon forget the lessons I encountered making Vultures of Tibet, and I'm excited to take up another curiosity and try to bridge the gap of myth with understanding though film.

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VITA

Russell Oliver Bush was born in Denver, Colorado on April 11th 1986. He received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from The University of California, Irvine in June of 2008. In the following years he worked as an intern at the San Francisco based documentary film organization The Independent Television Service [ITVS] and The National Geographic Society before returning to the film production MFA program at the University of Texas at Austin.

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